

County Manager Union County, NC

Union County, NC, is one of the southeastern United States' little known jewels. With its northwestern boundary lying barely 15 miles from the center of Charlotte, the residents of Union County can take advantage of everything the city has to offer and then return to a pastoral setting. With 14 municipalities and a large amount of unincorporated land, the County offers a wide variety of housing opportunities. Residential developments and small commercial centers are sprinkled among the County's open space and farm land. The public schools are excellent, ranked first in the state and are among the best in the nation. Residents place a high priority on education – in fact, they have never voted down a school bond issue. Many fine colleges and universities are within a few hours drive and well-regarded Wingate University is located near the center of the County. Entertainment, cultural, recreational and sporting activities are also nearby. Aside from its proximity to Charlotte, the County is a two hour drive to the Nantahala National Forest, three and half hours to Myrtle Beach, four and a half to Atlanta and seven hours to the nation's capital. Further, the cost of living and housing prices are reasonable and taxes are relatively low. But most importantly, the people are friendly and have a sense of community. Most will tell you that it is hard to find something not to like about Union County.

HISTORY AND COMMERCE

Settlers first began arriving in the region in the mid-1700s and, while they were centered in nearby Charlotte, some began to settle in what was to become Union County. United States President Andrew Jackson was born in 1767 in the then Scotch-Irish community of Waxhaw. Aside from the Revolutionary War, the area was largely peaceful and focused on farming. In 1842 Union County was formed from parts of Anson and Mecklenburg Counties. Its name was a compromise between the Whigs who wanted to call it Clay County after Henry Clay and the Democrats who wanted to name it Jackson County after Andrew Jackson. For most of its history, the County has been primarily agricultural although it did develop a small textile industry in Monroe (the county seat) in the 1880s. That industry moved elsewhere in the 1960s.

In many ways, the County seal represents Union County today. The three symbols on it are cotton representing agriculture, gears representing industry and a torch representing scholarship. Agriculture plays a very large role in the area. The County is, for example, the third largest agricultural county in North Carolina and ranks in the top three counties in the state in the production of soy beans, wheat, chickens and beef. The principal employers (those with over 1000 employees) include Union County School Public System, Tyson Farms, Carolinas Medical Center and ATI Allvac. Those with between 500 and 1000 include Union County, Wal-Mart, McGee Brothers, Harris Teeter, the City of Monroe and Charlotte Pipe and Foundry. In the last decade, construction was also a significant employer. At its peak in 2005 – 2006, the County issued almost 400 permits monthly for single family homes. It now issues between 25 and 50 per month. Overall, the work force is skilled and capable.

GEOGRAPHY, CLIMATE AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Union County covers 643 square miles and is located in the south central Piedmont region of North Carolina. Much of it is farmland, open fields, woods and gentle hills. In many ways, it is two counties with one government. The eastern part of the county is largely agrarian while the western part of the County is becoming residential as many with high incomes seek a quieter lifestyle, better schools and lower taxes than one would find in Charlotte / Mecklenburg County. As a point of reference, Marvin and Weddington are located in the western part and are two of the three most affluent communities in the Carolinas.

Union County's population grew steadily through most of its history until the 1990s. At that point, people began to recognize it as a viable alternative to Charlotte and growth escalated dramatically. In 1990, the population was 84,200. By 2000, it had grown to 123,700 and in 2009 it was estimated at 198,600. In the process, country crossroads became commercial centers and exclusive housing developments appeared almost overnight.

In terms of age, Union County is a relatively young county – the median age is approximately 33. As of 2008, approximately 28% of the population was under 18, 64% was between 18 and 64 and 8% was over 65. Annual per capita income was \$27,992 while annual per family income was \$68,910. The median home value was \$188,100. The population was 82% White, 12% Black and 6% other race or combination of races. Hispanics (of all races) made up 10% of the community. (Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 2006 – 2008 American Community Survey).

The County has four distinct but relatively mild seasons. During the winter months, the high temperatures average between 50°F and 55°F with the lows between 30°F and 35°F. Summer temperatures have average highs in the upper 80's with average lows in the upper 60s.

THE GOVERNMENT

Union County is governed by a five member commission, all of whom are elected at large. They serve staggered four year terms. Elections coincide with the national election and are partisan. While the current Commissioners are all Republicans, they often disagree. Turnover on the Commission has been significant and no Commissioner has served more than one term since 2002. By and large, they believe the County staff is knowledgeable, capable, hardworking and responsive.

Union County has two other constitutional officers: the Register of Deeds and the Sheriff. School Board Members are also separately elected. The County provides all the services a county typically provides including: Cultural and Recreational (library, parks and recreation), Economic and Physical Development (economic development, planning, cooperative extension and soil conservation), Human Services (public health, nutrition, social services, transportation and veterans' services), Public Safety (fire services, law enforcement, communications,

homeland security and inspection), and Business-type Activities (solid waste, stormwater, water and sewer). The County also provides funding to the public schools and owns a hospital that it leases to Carolinas Medical Center. It operates on a June 30 fiscal year and the general fund budget for 2010 – 2011 is \$223,855,000 (including schools at a cost of \$131,992,000). Other significant budget items are the funds for: Water and Sewer at \$27,189,000, Stormwater at \$286,700, Solid Waste - \$4,307,000 and Emergency Telephone at \$1,244,000). The County government (excluding the public schools) has just under 1,000 FTEs.

Overall, the County is in good financial condition. Its bonds have an Aa2 or Aa3 rating (depending on the issuance) from Moody's and an AA rating from Fitch.

THE ISSUES

Union County is not without issues. The recent growth created tremendous infrastructure needs. Between 2000 and 2005, the County built eight new schools and since 2005, it has built another seventeen. The growth also created tension between those who wished to grow and those who did not. Some friction also developed between those in the Western part of the County where much was invested in infrastructure and the Eastern part of the County which felt left out. Finance is also an issue. The government is already lean and new expenses are on the horizon. For example, the school construction program was funded through bonds and some of the required payments will begin to be included in the tax bills in FY 2011 – 2012. Further, a revaluation of property is scheduled to take place in 2012. The County has almost reached its self-imposed debt cap. On the other hand, with the downturn, the County has an opportunity to catch its breath. During the high growth period, it allocated water and sewer capacity to developers that exceeded both what was then available and what was planned. Opportunities exist to remedy the situation through purchases from nearby jurisdictions and plant expansions but these require time. Another issue is the county-owned hospital. Carolinas Medical Center (CMC) presently operates the facility under a lease that will expire in 2020. The question is whether the County should continue to own the hospital or whether it should sell it. For some, it is an emotional issue. Founded in 1918, the new building opened in 1953 and it was leased to CMC in 1995. Many long time residents or their children were born there. Still another challenge arises from the proximity to Charlotte / Mecklenburg. Employees are often hired in Union County, trained and then move to jobs with higher salaries in the neighboring county. One more challenge relates to the delivery of fire service. It is presently provided by special districts (with their own elected boards). Historically the departments have been staffed with volunteer departments although these volunteers have begun to be supplemented with permanent staffing. The County pays a portion of the bill for fire services and the question is how best to go forward. The final challenge is the turnover on the Board and the relatively frequent disagreement among its members. Three new Commissioners will be elected in November and begin serving in early December.

THE IDEAL CANDIDATE

Challenges also represent opportunities and the County Commission is looking for someone who can capitalize on these opportunities and to take the County to the next level.

The ideal candidate will see the role of the County Manager as not just being the Commissioners' employee but also their partner, supporter, trusted advisor and never their competitor. The Commission wants to be informed, not surprised. The best candidate will be someone who can make the Commissioners feel comfortable that their views are being heard and who will help bring them to consensus. The Commission wants someone with a high degree of integrity and who is intelligent, confident, outgoing, open, organized, energetic, patient practical, and progressive – someone with a “can do” attitude and someone who will not just ask why but will also ask why not? He/She will have a vision to lead the County to the next level. The next manager will be a leader – not a bureaucrat – resolute yet flexible, and will actively seek input from many sources. She/he will have excellent communications skills (including listening) and use them. Skill in working with the media will be important. The individual will be approachable, be in the community and part of the community. The next manager will always be listening and looking for ways to make the government more efficient and responsive. He/she will be respectful of others and encourage an environment where creativity will flourish. The individual will be able to recognize talent, mentor that talent and be confident enough to then step back and let the staff do its work. The ideal candidate will delegate and set broad performance parameters. She/he will also have high expectations and hold employees accountable. The selected candidate will believe in transparency but also realize its limitations. The individual will also be very open and approachable. Good judgment and common sense are essential. Finally, the next manager will have a healthy respect for history and recognize that the community is conservative.

In terms of specific skills, the individual will have a demonstrated track record of achievement in management, finance, utilities and growth management. Given the nature of the issues and the need for collaboration, a strong background in intergovernmental relations / regional cooperation is a desirable. Top notch negotiating skills will also be important as will be understanding the importance of taking advantage of the current economic slow down to prepare the County for the future.

The Commission is looking for someone to make a long term commitment to Union County. This position should be viewed as a gem, not as a stepping stone.

REQUIRED EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE

Master's degree in Public or Business Administration with 6 to 9 years experience in governmental management, policy and procedure, including thorough knowledge of State law governing County administration; or any equivalent combination of training and experience which provides the required skills, knowledge and abilities. The majority of the Commissioners have expressed a desire to see candidates with private sector experience.

COMPENSATION

The starting salary will be between \$120,000 and \$160,000. Benefits are excellent and the County participates in the North Carolina pension system.

RESIDENCY

Residency within the County's boundaries is required.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Under North Carolina law, it is illegal to release the names of the applicants. *Consequently, all applications will be kept strictly confidential and no candidate's names will be released without the candidate's prior permission.*

HOW TO APPLY

E-mail your resume to **RecruitSeven@cb-asso.com** by September 17, 2010. Note that while the timeframe is relatively short, this recruitment is a legitimate recruitment. There is no internal or preferred candidate. Faxed and mailed resumes will not be considered. Questions should be directed to Colin Baenziger of Colin Baenziger & Associates at (561) 707-3537.

OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Union County is an Equal Opportunity Employer and encourages minorities to apply. It is committed to serving its residents and businesses and providing the highest quality of service.